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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 001271

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DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/30/2029
TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM VE
SUBJECT: SCHOOLS ON ALERT, NO IMPLEMENTATION YET OF
EDUCATION LAW

REF: A. CARACAS 1086
 1B. CARACAS 1241
 1C. CARACAS 1269

Classified By: Political Counselor Robin D. Meyer,
for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

11. (C) Summary: Venezuelan schools and universities reopened on September 15 with little fanfare, despite earlier concerns about potential unrest as a result of the controversial new Education Law that was passed during the summer school recess (ref A). The Venezuelan government (GBRV) has not yet issued the implementing regulations for the new law. Educators and opposition leaders remain concerned by the level of discretion the law gives to the executive branch. Private schools, Catholic schools, and universities say the new law could seriously undermine the independence and quality of their educational systems. Schools and universities are now operating under a cloud of uncertainty in expectation of the GBRV's next steps to implement the new law. End summary.

PARENTS PREPARED TO PROTEST

12. (C) Private schools began the new school year on September 15 without any communication from the GBRV about the new Education Law, adopted by the National Assembly during the summer school recess (ref A). Suspicions are high about the law's real purpose. Octavio de Lamo, president of an association of private schools in Venezuela, told PolOff September 21 that teachers, parents and administrators were very concerned by the way the law tracks with the "Plan de Desarrllo Economic y Social de la Nacion 2007-2013," a document that overtly calls for the establishment of a socialist state. De Lamo's organization has held over 90 conferences throughout the country warning teachers and parents about the law's implication for education in Venezuela. While the new law empowers the GBRV to punish teachers and school administrators should they resist its implementation, de Lamo said, parents are able to protest more freely. On September 22, Ministry of Education officials met with private school leaders and assured them that their schools would not be dramatically affected. "The meeting was very cordial," de Lamo told PolOff, "and sometimes that is a sign of bad things to come."

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS FEEL THREATENED BY NEW LAW

13. (C) Per ref B, Cardinal Urosa expressed deep concern about the impact of the new Education Law on the funding and

curriculum of the Catholic schools, fearing that the law heralded the beginning of the end of Catholic school education in Venezuela. Catholic schools make up a significant percentage of grade school education in Venezuela, with the "Asociacion Venezolana de Education Catolica" representing over 500 schools and 80,000 students. Under the previous law, government support for Catholic schools was explicit, and De Lamo said teacher salaries were almost all funded by the GBRV.

¶4. (C) Another leader of the Catholic church in Venezuela, Monsignor Jose Luis Azuaje, told PolCouns September 23 that the provision for "secular education" in the new law was worrisome. However, he noted that the Venezuelan school system could not survive a mass closure of Catholic schools given the numbers of schools and students involved. What could happen, he said, was that the GBRV could expropriate the schools completely, replacing the administration with Ministry of Education employees. "We have to read this law within the context of other new laws," he said, noting that the GBRV has expanded its authority over private property throughout the country. However, per ref B, Valencia Bishop del Prette suggested that the new law needed to be seen in the context of the traditionally large gap between law and practice in Venezuela.

UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY UNDER THREAT

¶5. (C) At the university level, student leaders and university administrators expressed concern about the effect of the new law on university independence. Universidad

Central de Venezuela's (UCV's) Vice Rector for Academic Affairs Nicolas Bianco told PolOff September 22 that UCV's lawyers believe the law allows GBRV interference in admissions, courses of study, research topics, teaching hiring and promotion, and election of university leaders. Bianco said 10 leading universities would ask the Supreme Court to declare the law unconstitutional, not out of a belief in the impartiality of the court, but to demonstrate that the universities were pursuing legal avenues of protest. UCV administrators and student leaders are coordinating efforts to prevent the implementation of the law.

¶6. (C) One student leader told PolOff September 25 that students felt the government had arrested several students in the weeks following the law's approval in order to weaken protests of the new law. (Note: Students across the country participated in a hunger strike from September 24 to 30. The protest, originally in support of the release of detained student activist Julio Rivas, broadened to include demands for the release of all political prisoners and for a visit by the OAS Commission on Human Rights. See ref C. End note.) Other threats to the UCV continue: the press reported the university has experienced several incidents of vandalism over the past weeks, and Bianco said UCV's Rector regularly receives threats to her personal safety.

SOME MOVEMENT TOWARDS IMPLEMENTATION

¶7. (C) The GBRV has taken some initial steps to pave the way for implementation of the new law, including a publicity campaign involving radio advertisements with a young voice praising the law's changes to the education system. Roberto Ruiz Tovar, Baruta Municipality Official, told Emboffs September 28 that some of the "Consejo Communales" (local community councils) in Baruta had elected education commissioners in preparation for their new role in the education system, as authorized in the law. There are reports of Ministry of Education officials visiting private schools, although they have not attempted to make any changes. However, the new education law reportedly requires dozens of implementing regulations and laws, none of which have to date been either issued or adopted.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Venezuelan educators are bracing themselves for the coming changes as the GBRV develops the necessary implementing regulations and laws. The GBRV appears to be introducing changes over time in order to avoid focused opposition.

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